DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 484 UD 035 907

AUTHOR	Lartigue, Casey J., Jr.
TITLE	School Choice in the District of Columbia: Saving Taxpayers Money, Increasing Opportunities for Children. Briefing Paper.
INSTITUTION	Cato Inst., Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	No-86
PUB DATE	2003-09-19
NOTE	9p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Cato Institute, 1000 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20001 ($2). Tel: 202-842-0200; Fax: 202-842-3490; Web site: http://www.cato.org.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Finance; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; Parochial Schools; Private Schools; Public Schools; *School Choice; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*District of Columbia

ABSTRACT

This brief presents information on per pupil expenditure versus non-public school tuition and the availability of non-public classroom spaces in the District of Columbia. It argues that proposed school choice programs would allow pupils to use vouchers to attend the parochial or private school of their parents' choice. An analysis of the private and parochial schools in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area reveals the following: private schools in Washington and surrounding areas charge less on average than the D.C. public school system spends per pupil; the D.C. public school system, which has suffered from overspending and budget deficits in the last few years, could find its enrollment reduced by almost 10 percent as a result of a voucher program; private schools in Washington could immediately accommodate about 2,925 students now attending public or charter schools; and allowing all independent and parochial schools in the Washington metro area to participate in a school choice program could add almost 3,500 more spaces, since there are more than 6,000 seats available in local, nonpublic schools. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 481 484

CATO INSTITUTE BRIEFING PAPERS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.
PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
G.F. Taylor
CATO Institute
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
1

School Choice in the District of Columbia

Saving Taxpayers Money, Increasing Opportunities for Children

by Casey J. Lartigue Jr.

No. 86 **September 19, 2003**

Executive Summary

Members of Congress and President Bush have put forth proposals that would establish school voucher programs in the District of Columbia. Those programs would allow pupils to use vouchers to attend the parochial or private school of their parents' choice. Could private schools increase the range of academic options in the nation's capital by educating students currently attending District of Columbia public schools?

An analysis of the private and parochial schools in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area reveals the following:

- Private schools in Washington and surrounding areas charge less on average than the D.C. public school system spends per pupil.
- The D.C. public school system, which has suffered from overspending and budget deficits in the last few years, could find its enrollment reduced by almost 10 percent as a result of a voucher program.
- Private schools in Washington could immediately accommodate about 2,925 students now attending public or charter schools. Allowing all independent and parochial schools in the Washington metro area to participate in a school choice program could add almost 3,500 more spaces, since there are more than 6,000 seats available in local, nonpublic schools.

Casey J. Lartigue Jr. is an education policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

UD 035 907

Dissatisfaction with the District of Columbia's public schools has led many parents to take their children out of those schools.

Introduction

Despite the presence of "free" public schools, many parents across the country make financial sacrifices to enroll their children in independent and religiously affiliated schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 11 percent of children attend private schools. In fall 2001 an estimated 47 million students were enrolled in 92,000 public schools; and 5.9 million students were enrolled in 27,200 private schools.[1] There are many reasons for families to choose private schools, and dissatisfaction with the quality of education in the public schools is certainly one of them.

Such dissatisfaction is particularly acute in the nation's capital, where public education is in crisis. Children in the District of Columbia public schools have been underachieving according to just about every educational achievement measure.

In 2002 D.C. public school students averaged a total score of 796 out of 1600 on the Scholastic Assessment Test. In comparison, as Table 1 indicates, the national average was 1020 and D.C. private school students averaged about 1200 on the SAT (1188 for religiously affiliated schools, 1210 for independent schools). Table 2 shows that the D.C. public school average was 224 points below the national average of 1020 on the SAT and about 400 points below the average of D.C.'s private school students. Instead of narrowing, the gap between the national average and D.C. public schools has increased from 203 to 224 points since 1998.[2] The gap has also widened between D.C.'s public and private schools.

On the Stanford 9 achievement test in 2002, 24 percent of D.C. students read and 36 percent performed math at the "Below Basic" level, demonstrating little or no mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills

Table 1
SAT Scores for Public, Independent, and Religious Schools in Washington, D.C., 1998–2002

School	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Public	811	813	822	798	796
Independent	1183	1194	1184	1187	1210
Religious	1170	1177	1200	1200	1188
U.S. average	1017	1016	1019	1020	1020

Source: Paul L. Vance, "A Five-Year Statistical Glance at D.C. Public Schools: School Years 1996–97 through 2000–01," February 2002. Copies of this report can be obtained from the D.C. Board of Education.

Table 2
The SAT Gap, in Total Points, between the D.C. Public Schools and the National Average, Scores for D.C. Religious Schools, and Scores for D.C. Independent Schools, 1998–2002

School	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Independent	372	381	362	389	414
Religious	359	364	378	402	392
U.S. average	206	203	197	222	224

Source: Paul L. Vance, "A Five-Year Statistical Glance at D.C. Public Schools: School Years 1996–97 through 2000–01," February 2002. Copies of this report can be obtained from the D.C. Board of Education.

Table 3
NAEP 2002 Trial Urban District Assessment, Reading

	Percentage at or above Basic	Percentage at or above Proficient
	4th Graders	
National (public)	62	30
Central city (public)	51	21
Atlanta	35	12
Chicago	34	11
Houston	48	18
Los Angeles	33	11
New York City	47	19
District of Columbia	31	10
	8th Graders	
National (public)	74	31
Central city (public)	64	23
Atlanta	42	8
Chicago	62	15
District of Columbia	48	10
Houston	59	17
Los Angeles	44	10

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2002 Trial Urban District Reading Assessment.
Note: According to NCES, data are not reported for New York at the eighth grade due to a low response rate.

appropriate to their grade level. More than 70 percent of 10th and 11th graders performed math at the "Below Basic" level. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, D.C. students scored well below the national average, with more than 85 percent of students scoring at the "Basic" or "Below Basic" level.[3] Also, according to the State Education Agency, 37 percent of District residents read at or below the 3rd-grade level.[4]

In a more targeted comparison, data from six urban school districts (the District of Columbia, Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and New York) were compiled for the NAEP 2002 Trial Urban District Assessment in reading and writing at grades 4 and 8[5] (Tables 3 and 4). All of the urban districts performed below the national average, with D.C. scoring at the bottom in most categories.[6]

Dissatisfaction with the District of Columbia's public schools has led many parents to take their children out of those schools. About 30 percent of children attending schools in the District of Columbia go to schools outside the traditional public school system. An estimated 11,000 residents attend charter schools.[7] About 18,000 students (about half of whom are D.C. residents) attend religiously affiliated and independent schools in the District.

In response to the public schools' troubles, some observers have proposed that D.C. introduce a school choice program. The mayor and the president of the D.C. Board of Education cited the failure of the D.C. public school system as a reason for ending their opposition to vouchers.[8] The president and members of Congress have proposed school choice plans that would allow families to use federal education dollars to buy education services from private providers, further increasing educational options. Because private schools charge less on average than public schools spend and often subsidize tuition for low-income students, taxpayers in the District would realize savings, and students would have more educational opportunities.[9]

In response to the public schools' troubles, some observers have proposed that D.C. introduce a school choice program.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 4
NAEP 2002 Trial Urban District Assessment, Writing

	Percentage at or above Basic	Percentage at or above Proficient
	4th Graders	
National (public)	85	27
Central city (public)	81	21
Atlanta	77	13
Chicago	76	12
District of Columbia	73	11
Houston	81	23
Los Angeles	77	16
New York City	85	27
	8th Graders	
National (public)	84	30
Central city (public)	77	22
Atlanta	68	10
Chicago	72	16
District of Columbia	66	10
Houston	74	19
Los Angeles	64	11

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2002 Trial Urban District Writing Assessment.
Note: According to NCES, data are not reported for New York at the eighth grade due to a low response rate.

Capacity of Private Schools in the Washington, D.C., Area

There are more than 80 private elementary and secondary schools in Washington, D.C., according to the U.S. Department of Education and a Cato Institute survey.[10] Overall, the *Independent School Guide* lists 475 private elementary, secondary, and nursery schools in the greater Washington metro area.[11] The Cato Institute contacted 70 private schools.

Surveys conducted in recent years suggest that private and parochial schools could play a significant role in offering more choices for children in the nation's capital.

Surveys conducted in recent years suggest that private and parochial schools could play a significant role in offering more choices for children in the nation's capital. In 1997 a Washington Scholarship Fund survey found 4,000 available seats in the Washington metro area, half of which were in the District.[12] The superintendent of Washington Archdiocese schools in 1998 testified that Catholic schools "are eager to serve more of the District's children." He estimated that up to 2,000 additional students could be accommodated in area Catholic schools.[13] Surveys conducted during the last year indicate that local private schools could accommodate about 2,000 children. Archdiocese officials estimated that 1,200 children could be accommodated immediately.[14] A survey of private schools in the Washington metro area by the Washington Scholarship Fund found at least 4,000 available spaces, with almost 1,800 in the District. The Washington Scholarship Fund asked schools about their class sizes and current enrollment to calculate the number of available seats.[15] A Cato Institute survey conducted in June of this year asked private schools how many more students they believed they could accept. Seventy private schools in the District reported that they could make space for another 2,500 students, an average of 35 available seats per school. Extrapolating that average to the remaining 15 schools, there could be 2,925 seats available in D.C. private schools.[16] The same Cato Institute survey found that about 75 private schools in Virginia (703 area code) and Maryland (301 area code) could

accommodate an additional 3,407 students (see Table 5). There are at least 25 private schools within a 10-mile radius of Washington. Filling those seats could reduce D.C.'s public school enrollment by almost 10 percent.[17]

And of course, the introduction of vouchers to the District could stimulate an expansion of private school capacity that would rival the growth in the number of charter schools within the city. In 1995 charter schools were virtually nonexistent in the nation's capital. Today the District has about 40 charter schools serving more than 11,000 students. A voucher program may start small, but within a decade it could serve as many students as charter schools now do. It could also change the makeup of private schools. Parochial schools currently dominate because subsidies from religious institutions keep their costs low. The number of nonparochial schools may increase with vouchers making more schools affordable for families.

Within a decade a voucher program could serve as many students as charter schools now do.

Cost of Schools in the Nation's Capital

There is little agreement about the cost of public education in the nation's capital (see Table 6). Estimates range from $8,536 per

Table 5
How Many Students Could Be Accommodated in Private Schools in the D.C. Metro Area?

Private school spaces currently available in D.C.	2,925
Private schools spaces currently available in MD, VA	3,407
Total available spaces in the D.C. metro area	6,332

Source: Cato Institute survey, June 2003.

Table 6
What Is the Cost of Public Education in the Nation's Capital? It Depends on Who Does the Counting

Source	Per Pupil Cost
U.S. Census Bureau	$15,122 (all costs included)[a]
U.S. Census Bureau	$10,852 (operating fund)[a]
National Education Association	$13,525[b]
U.S. Department of Education	$11,009[c]
D.C. Public Schools, Superintendent's Office	$10,477[d]
Parents United for DC Public Schools	$10,031 (including federal grants)[e]
Parents United for DC Public Schools	$8,536 (local funds only)[e]

[a] From: U.S. Census Bureau, *Public Education Finances 2001*, March 2003, Table 11.
[b] From National Education Association, *Rankings & Estimates: Rankings of the States 2002 and Estimates of School Statistics 2003*, May 2003, Table H-11.
[c] From Lena M. McDowell and Frank Johnson, National Center for Education Statistics, *Early Estimates of Public Elementary and Secondary Education Statistics: School Year 2001–02*, April 2002, Table 7, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002311.pdf.
[d] From Paul L. Vance, "A Five-Year Statistical Glance at D.C. Public Schools: School Years 1996–97 through 2000–01," February 2002, Copies of this report can be obtained from the D.C. Board of Education.
[e] From Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools, "D.C. Public School Funding: Myth & Reality," February 2003, p. 11.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

student to $15,122, depending on who does the counting and what is counted.

In comparison, the Cato Institute's analyses reveal that private schools in the nation's capital cost much less than public schools in the area[18] (see Table 7). The average cost of private elementary schools in the District is $4,500, the average secondary school cost $16,075. More than half of private elementary and secondary schools in the District cost less than $7,500 per year. Almost 70 percent (69.4 percent) of private elementary schools and 18.2 percent of private high schools in the District cost less than $7,500 per year.

Almost 70 percent of private elementary schools and 18.2 percent of private high schools in the District cost less than $7,500 per year.

Private schools in northern Virginia and southern Maryland are somewhat more affordable than those within the borders of the District of Columbia. Eighty-eight percent of private elementary schools and 60 percent of private secondary schools in the area charge less than $7,500 annually. The median private elementary school tuition in those areas is $4,288 annually, and for private secondary schools the cost is $6,920, almost $10,000 less than private high schools in D.C. Allowing D.C. residents to use vouchers to transfer to cheaper schools in northern Virginia and southern Maryland would result in increased choices for D.C. school children and greater savings for D.C. taxpayers.

Private schools already heavily subsidize the tuition of low-income students. About 25 percent of Washington Archdiocese schools have tuition rates that cover only 50 to 70 percent of the real cost of educating a child.[19] According to a 1998 study by the U.S. Department of Education, tuition revenues provide 82 percent of total operating funds at most U.S. parochial schools.[20] If vouchers paid the full cost for students to attend parochial schools, such schools would be able to expand their facilities and even build new schools.

D.C. Public Schools Under Capacity

According to C. Vanessa Spinner, acting director of the D.C. State Education Agency, the District's public school system is barely operating at half capacity. The system can accommodate 120,000 students. There are about 66,000 students currently in the system.[21] Numerous underutilized facilities are being kept open, even when they are not economically feasible. Superintendent Paul L. Vance said at a December 2002 news conference that the public school system had 14,000 open work orders and needed money to pay for repairs.[22] The D.C. public school system needs to consider closing its most decrepit schools rather than continuing to spend money on repairs to schools operating under capacity.

With almost 150 public schools in a system that has been losing students, the D.C. public school system could merge several schools to save taxpayer money. In October 2002 Mayor Anthony A. Williams suggested establishing a commission to determine whether some schools and other city buildings should be closed because of underuse.[23] Sixty school buildings have been declared surplus within the last few years, yet the District is building more schools.[24] Instead of

Table 7
Cost of Private Schools in the D.C. Metro area

Area	Type of School	Median per Pupil Cost
District of Columbia	Private elementary	$4,500
District of Columbia	Private secondary	$16,075
Maryland and Virginia	Private elementary	$4,288
Maryland and Virginia	Private secondary	$6,920

Source: Cato Institute survey, 2003.

closing or merging schools operating at half capacity and cutting back on operating costs, city leaders have sought to renovate every school, at a total cost of $2 billion over the next 10 to 15 years.[25] The city and the school system should close schools with the fewest students and most in need of renovation.

Charter schools in the District, which must currently acquire their own facilities, could use buildings currently underutilized by the public school system. Other facilities could be given to or auctioned off to private entrepreneurs who agreed to operate them as schools. Because of the political sensitivities that come with closing schools, army bases, or fire stations, an independent group should determine which schools should be closed.

Instead of spending billions of taxpayer dollars to renovate underutilized schools, the District could stimulate the expansion of a private school market with vouchers. Maine and Vermont have financed education for students attending private schools for decades. About 35 percent of all students enrolled in Maine's private schools are publicly funded. Towns receive full or partial reimbursement from the state of Maine for the part of the tuition they pay for each child.[26] Since 1869 Vermont has operated a voucher program, which pays tuition for students to attend public and private schools.[27]

With political and educational leaders in the District of Columbia reversing their opposition to vouchers, residents of the city will finally have the opportunity to increase the number of educational choices available to children. In testimony before Congress in late June, Mayor Williams did not rule out the possibility that the voucher program could eventually be expanded to include Virginia and Maryland.[28]

Conclusion

The problems with public schools in the District of Columbia have been documented in numerous studies. The city government, taxpayers, and families in the D.C. area would benefit if D.C. children were allowed to spend the education dollars allocated for them on private schools. The city would benefit from resources now wasted by schools operating at half capacity. Taxpayers would benefit because children would be educated at lower-cost private schools in the area. Low-income families would benefit from being able to choose among a range of public, private, and charter schools to serve their needs. Most of all, children in the District would benefit from competition created by public, private, and charter schools vying for their tuition dollars.

Children in the District would benefit from competition created by public, private, and charter schools vying for their tuition dollars.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2001*, tables 1 and 5, http://nces.ed.gov //pubs2002 /digest2001/tables/dt001.asp and http://nces.ed.gov//pubs2002/digest2001/tables/dt005.asp.

2. College Board, "2002 Profile of College-Bound Seniors, High School Information, the District of Columbia," New York, 2002, p. 19. Slightly less than half of the test takers in the District (1,740) were from public schools; 912 were from religiously affiliated schools: 459 were from independent schools; and 374 were from unknown (typically charter, correspondence, home, and nonaccredited) schools.

3. Paul L. Vance, "A Five-Year Statistical Glance at D.C. Public Schools: School Years 1996–97 through 2000–01," February 2002. Copies of this report can be obtained from the D.C. Board of Education.

4. The D.C. State Education Agency was established under the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act to help fund programs for adults over 16 who don't have a high school diploma. Housed at the University of the District of Columbia, SEA funds 23 local programs to help men and women improve their reading, math, or computer skills or learn to speak English. See www.easternlincs.org/DCsite/factsstats.htm for more information.

5. National Center for Education Statistics, "The Nation's Report Card Trial Urban District Assessment, Reading 2002 and Writing 2002," July 22, 2003, http://nces.ed.gov/commissioner/remarks2003/7_22_2003.asp.

8 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

6. District of Columbia Public Schools, "District of Columbia Public Schools Is One of Six Large Urban Districts to Participate in First Trial Urban National Assessment Education Progress (NAEP)," news release, July 22, 2003, www.k12.dc.us/dcps/dcpsnews/newsrelease/NAEP%20Release%20-%20July%2021%202003.pdf.

7. 21st Century School Fund et al., "Response to Federally Imposing Vouchers in the District of Columbia District," January 23, 2003, www.dcvoice.org/QuickNews/VoucherResponse.pdf.

8. Peggy Cooper Cafritz, "Making the Most of Vouchers," *Washington Post*, March 29, 2003, p. A17; and Justin Blum, "Williams Explains Voucher Decision; Federal Program Could Aid Pupils in 'Bad Schools,'" *Washington Post*, May 10, 2003, p. B1.

9. The Archdiocese of Washington estimates that it saves taxpayers approximately $200 million in annual educational expenditures. See Archdiocese of Washington, "National Research on Catholic Schools," www.adw.org/education/ edu_research. html.

10. According to the search engine of the National Center for Education Statistics, Office of Non-Public Education, there are 83 private schools in the District of Columbia. See http://nces.ed.gov/suveys/pss/privateschoolsearch. The Cato Institute identified 85 private schools in the District.

11. Jill Zacharie, *Independent School Guide for Washington, D.C., and Surrounding Area* (Alexandria, VA: Lift Hill, 2001).

12. Samuel Casey Carter, "A Question of Capacity," *Policy Review*, January–February 1999.

13. Quoted in Coalition for American Private Education Outlook Newletter, "Congress Approves Historic School Choice Legislation," May 1998, www.capenet.org/Out5-98.html.

14. Marc Fisher, "Cafritz Rolls with the Polls," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2003, p. B1.

15. These data were obtained directly from the Washington Scholarship Fund. It conducted a survey over several months in mid-2003. WSF received answers in writing to a host of questions about enrollment, tuition, admission fees, and class size.

16. The Cato Institute attempted to contact all 85 D.C. private schools via telephone. Fifteen schools either did not provide information or could not be reached after several attempts.

17. The D.C. public school system currently has about 66,000 students. The exodus of 6,300 students to private schools in the D.C. metro area would reduce the public school system's enrollment by almost 10 percent.

18. Cato Institute survey; and David Salisbury, "What Does a Voucher Buy? A Closer Look at the Cost of Private Schools," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 486, August 28, 2003. Private school costs in Maryland and Virginia were obtained from the Children's Scholarship Fund and by telephone contact with the private schools.

19. Valerie Strauss, "Tuition, Pay to Jump at Catholic Schools; Shortage of Teachers Forces Changes," *Washington Post*, January 27, 2000, p. B1.

20. Lana Muraskin and Stephanie Stullich, "Barriers, Benefits and Costs of Using Private Schools to Alleviate Overcrowding in Public Schools," U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, November 1998, p. 13.

21. Connie Spinner appeared as a guest on WOL 1450-AM, discussing the impact of vouchers in the District of Columbia, June 11, 2003.

22. Yolanda Woodlee and Justin Blum, "NE School's Woes Leave Staff, Pupils Cold; Balky Boiler, Broken Windows Make for Chilly Conditions at Taft Junior High," *Washington Post*, December 3, 2002, p. B3.

23. "D.C. Schools Get a Lesson in Economics; Cost of Renovations Is Far above Projections," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2002, B1.

24. "Mayor Illegally Blocks Schoolhouse Door," *Washington Times*, September 18, 2002, p. A16.

25. Justin Blum, "Despite Sinking Enrollment, Proposal Calls for Rebuilding," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2000, p. B2.

26. Frank Heller, "Lessons from Maine: Education Vouchers for Students since 1873," Cato Institute Briefing Paper, no. 66, September 10, 2001, www.cato.org/pubs/briefs/bp-066es.html.

27. Libby Sternberg, "Lessons from Vermont: 132-Year-Old Voucher Program Rebuts Critics," Cato Institute Briefing Paper no. 67, September 10, 2001, www.cato.org/pubs/briefs/bp-067es.html.

28. Anthony Williams, Testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform, May 9, 2003.

Published by the Cato Institute, *Cato Briefing Papers* is a regular series evaluating government policies and offering proposals for reform. Nothing in *Cato Briefing Papers* should be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the Cato Institute or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

CATO INSTITUTE

Contact the Cato Institute for reprint permission. Additional copies of *Cato Briefing Papers* are $2.00 each ($1.00 in bulk). To order, or for a complete listing of available studies, write the Cato Institute, 1000 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001. (202) 842-0200 FAX (202) 842-3490.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

X	This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.
	This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").